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OPPOSE - HB-5059 - AN ACT CONCERNING VOTER TURNOUT FOR MUNICIPAL CHARTER REVISION.

The Connecticut Council of Small Towns (COST) opposes HB-5059, which would invalidate the approval of a proposed charter, charter amendments or home rule ordinance if less than 15% of registered voters turnout for a regular election.

The charter revision process is generally a lengthy process, involving countless hours of discussion and deliberation. Charter revision commissions recognize how important it is to involve the public in such discussions and deliberations to ensure that they understand and support these efforts.

Current law also recognizes the importance of keeping the public informed about changes to a town's charter. Existing law requires charter revision commissions to hold at least two public hearings on any proposed charter, charter amendments or home rule ordinance amendments, one prior to any substantive work on the charter and one after the draft report to the appointing authority.

In addition, the appointing authority is required hold at least one public hearing on the draft report before it determines whether to approve the proposed charter, charter amendments or home rule ordinance amendments or make any changes. The proposed charter is required to be published in full or the portion of the charter or home rule ordinance being amended must be published in a newspaper with a notice that the complete copy can be obtained from the town clerk.

In addition, to encourage residents to go to the polls to vote on such matters, towns post information on municipal websites, email residents, hold town forums and encourage news media outlets to post information. Some have used volunteers to call registered voters to remind them that charter revision questions are on the ballot. Fortunately, with one or two exceptions over the years, voter turnout in regular elections in Connecticut's small towns exceeds 15%.

However, HB-5059 creates a dangerous precedent by invalidating the approval of the proposed charter, charter revision or home rule ordinance at a regular election if a certain percentage of registered voters fails to exercise their right to vote. Why should the voter threshold for a charter revision be different than it is for the election of our local, state and federal representatives who are empowered to adopt laws affecting every aspect of our daily life?

Rather than invalidate the work of so many in the community – work that has been publicly noticed on several occasions – lawmakers should focus on efforts to encourage citizens to register and vote in regular and special elections.